Reading Philosophy

Simon Oliver
University of Nottingham

We often think that theology and philosophy have a natural association. As theologians, we expect to read texts and discuss questions which fall within the ambit of philosophy. For example, most students will engage with philosophy of religion in its various guises. Such works might focus on specific questions concerning the existence of God or the problem of evil. A philosophical approach to religion might also include fundamental issues of existence and knowledge in relation to God, or the science of interpretation which we call hermeneutics. However, when we consider the activity of 'reading philosophy', what is it that we are invited to read? There are countless philosophical traditions which produce very different texts, from the dialogues of Plato to the lectures of Hegel, the treatises of Plotinus to the laconic notes of Wittgenstein. Each tradition has its own priorities, methods and questions which have countless theological implications. Likewise, theology has implications for the way in which we understand the nature and scope of philosophy.

The practice of philosophical enquiry and the kinds of philosophical texts which we might read have changed significantly over the course of our intellectual history. Therefore, in this chapter I intend to take a broadly historical approach to the topic of 'reading philosophy'. We will explore the different ways in which the philosophical task has been understood, and discover some examples of how one might read philosophy in its various forms. Initially, I will focus on the period prior to Christianity and the ancient Greek understanding of philosophy as a way of life. This influenced the kinds of text that emerged from the teachings of various philosophers; over time, they came to form the basis of philosophical schools such as Platonism and Stoicism. It was these Greek texts that proved critical to the formation of Christian teaching, so I will next examine the reading of philosophy by the Christian theologians of the first six centuries. Given that they possessed the treasures of Christ's revelation witnessed in Scripture, why did Christianity's first theologians bother reading pagan philosophy? This will lead us into a discussion of the relationship between reason, which is often associated with philosophy, and faith, which is often associated with theology. How does the reading of philosophy aid the life of faith? This will lead us to a consider the

way in which philosophy is read in the Middle Ages. I will suggest that philosophy is not read in order to scrutinise theology; neither is it read in order to provide theology with rational foundations. Instead, philosophy is read in order to provide the tools to clarify the meaning and implications of the revealed things of faith. Philosophy is read *with* theology in order to aid the life of faith. We will then examine a significant change in the way in which philosophy is practiced, written and read in the modern period, using René Descartes (1596-1650) as an example. Here, we find very different philosophical texts which are read in new ways. Finally, we will briefly examine the priorities of twentieth century philosophy, exploring the way in which the reading of these texts by theologians continues to be crucial to the theological task. Throughout this chapter, there will be three governing questions concerning 'reading philosophy': *What* are we reading? *How* should we read it? *Why* should we read it?

Reading Ancient Philosophy

When you think of a philosopher, what kind of character comes to mind? It may be an image akin to Rodin's famous sculpture 'The Thinker', cast in 1902. A man sits alone in deep contemplation, his chin resting on his hand. The figure is almost enclosed; the body envelops a thought. This image reflects the view that a philosopher is a lone and thoughtful figure who is captivated by abstract ideas concerning our most fundamental and perplexing problems.

This image of the lone thinker engrossed in abstract thoughts may be an appropriate way of imagining modern philosophy, but it fails to capture important aspects of the philosophy which influenced Christian thought in the ancient world. In particular, philosophy in ancient Greece was concerned not simply with 'thinking' in the abstract sense, but with an entire way of life. A philosopher – literally, of course, a lover of wisdom – was a particular kind of person who aspired to certain excellences or virtues. The philosopher lived 'the examined life' in which the practices of daily living were continuously scrutinised in order to achieve calmness and peace for the soul. This pursuit of a striking and strange form of life was undertaken within a number of philosophical schools that emerged from around the fourth century BC. Perhaps the most famous of these was the Academy founded by Plato (c.429BC–c.347BC) which included Aristotle (384BC-322BC) amongst its pupils. To begin with, the Academy was little more than a private discussion group, but it evolved into an organized school for the instruction of students who desired wisdom. Importantly, philosophy in

antiquity was concerned as much with the kind of person one should be and how one should live as it was with knowledge and experience. In other words, practical questions concerning how to live and act were knit together with speculative questions about existence and truth. In order to perceive truth, one had to live a certain kind of ordered and focussed life. Importantly, philosophy was a pursuit that was undertaken communally and by means of conversation and discussion.

The conversational character of ancient philosophy meant that it was primarily an oral rather than a written tradition. This is not altogether surprising because the invention of the printing press that gave such prominence to written texts was many centuries away. This is why handwritten copies of texts, which required huge amounts of time and skill for their production, were so rare and precious in the ancient and medieval worlds. A scroll or a book was something of enormous value. Many students would hear, rather than read, a text. Owning their own copy was almost unthinkable, so texts were often committed to memory. However, there are other reasons for the importance of the spoken word and the centrality of such arts as rhetoric and persuasion to the discipline of philosophy. Many of these can be seen in Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*. At the beginning of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates, Plato's teacher and the principal character in many of his dialogues, is taking a walk outside the walls of Athens. He is in conversation with Phaedrus who has been listening to a speech about the nature of love delivered by a famous Athenian rhetorician known as Lysias. Socrates expresses his great desire to hear Lysias's speech and, suspecting that Phaedrus has a copy hidden under his cloak, Socrates persuades him to perform the speech. What is the significance of Phaedrus possessing a *written* copy of Lysias's speech? To write down a speech implies that it can be repeated endlessly *as the same speech*; it can be read over and over again. The speech has, as it were, been 'captured'. Once written down, the speech becomes a document to be passed on; the knowledge it contains can be bought and sold. But when Phaedrus reads Lysias's speech, is Socrates hearing Lysias or merely a copy or echo of Lysias? Plato's dialogue suggests that there is far more to a speech and the learning that it conveys than merely the written words. The context of the speech, including its time and location, the immediate purpose of the speech and the characters of its hearers, are all crucial to the speech's meaning. Plato sees that the context in which wisdom is conveyed is crucial to a proper understanding and the attainment of a perfect state of being and knowledge which all philosophers seek. Towards the end of the dialogue, this leads Plato to suggest that the spoken word is of greater value than the written word. Why? Because the written word

implies that wisdom or knowledge can be fixed, captured and endlessly traded. But wisdom, for Plato and his teacher Socrates, is drawn out of a student by conversation in which circumstance and context – the very form of life – are crucial. The spoken word is fluid and fleeting. It does not pretend to capture wisdom, but seeks it through the performance and movement of rhetoric. To make this point more simply, think of one of the most famous speeches of the twentieth century: Marin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech, so iconic of the American civil rights movement. Imagine the difference between *reading* this speech on the internet today, and the experience of an African American standing at the steps of the Lincoln memorial in Washington, DC *listening* to King's oration on that August day in 1963. Surely to understand the real power and persuasiveness of Martin Luther King's speech, one must remember its original context and the mode of its delivery, not simply words typed on a page or appearing on a computer screen.

This is why rhetoric, persuasion and, therefore, conversation are so important in the *practice* of ancient Greek philosophy. When we read such philosophy, we must therefore remember that such documents were not intended to be read privately and individually. The treatises of ancient philosophy are frequently the edited notes of students or dictations to a scribe. They were written so that they might be read aloud with all the nuances of the original delivery. The principal means of conducting philosophy was oral discourse. The French classical scholar Pierre Hadot outlines the importance of this way of conveying the philosophical life:

> This relationship between the written and spoken word thus explains certain aspects of the works of antiquity. Quite often the work proceeds by the association of ideas, without systematic rigor. The work retains the starts and stops, the hesitations, and the repetitions of spoken discourse. Or else, after re-reading what he has written, the author introduces a somewhat forced systematization by adding transitions, introductions, or conclusions to different parts of the work.[1]

This helps us to understand why reading ancient philosophy is often so challenging. The pages of Plato and Aristotle will rarely contain the neat orderings of modern textbooks. These

[1] Pierre Hadot, trans. Michael Chase, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995, p.62. See also Pierre Hadot, trans. Michael Chase, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002).

philosophical works are the written record of what was originally a shared *conversation* in the pursuit of wisdom and truth. In fact, the practice of reading privately and silently was relatively unknown in the ancient world. Texts would have been read aloud, communally.[2] Reading was an activity not simply of the mind, but also of the voice and the body.[3]

So to learn philosophy in the ancient world was to be inaugurated into a particular school of thought whose aim was not simply to convey knowledge, but to train students in certain spiritual practices and forms of life which enabled the philosopher to see differently, beyond the immediate appearances of things. This was a training in how to look at the world in order to discern its meaning. Each school had its authorities and masters. Strict curricula were established whereby students would study authoritative works in a particular order, enabling apprentice philosophers to develop in a rational manner towards spiritual maturity.

While the principal means for the conduct of philosophy remained oral discussion, from the third century BC a tradition of writing commentaries on authoritative works became increasingly popular. The so-called 'commentarial tradition' remained prominent throughout antiquity and the medieval period, up to the sixteenth century. We therefore have two kinds of text to read: the primary authoritative texts of the masters of ancient philosophy, and commentaries on those texts which are provided for the guidance of student philosophers. Just like the religious and Biblical traditions of Judaism and Christianity, ancient philosophy had its authoritative texts combined with commentaries on, or expositions of, those texts. It might therefore be best to understand philosophy in antiquity not simply as a set of abstract philosophical questions, but as a way of life in which conversation with a whole tradition of thought and practice features very prominently.

So how are we to read these texts and enter the conversation of ancient philosophy? It is important to preserve something of the strangeness of the texts and the unfamiliarity of the world from which they emerge. As twenty-first century readers, there will always be a temptation to domesticate such philosophy and to read the texts through the lens of modern assumptions and priorities. So there are perhaps two key challenges of which we should be

[2] For an excellent account of the practical ways in which texts were read in the ancient and mediaeval worlds, see Peter M. Candler Jr., *Theology, Rhetoric and Manuduction, or Reading Scripture Together on the Path to God*, Grand Rapids, Michigan/ London: Eerdmans Publishing Company/ SCM, 2007, especially pp.1-20.
[3] See Dolores Warwick Frese and Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, eds., *The Book and the Body* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1997), cited in Candler, op.cit., p.6.

aware in our practice of reading. The first challenge is our tendency to assume that human knowledge and wisdom progress smoothly through time. We tend to think that what comes later in our intellectual history is more advanced, more correct, wiser or simply better than what belongs to the dim and distant past. Of course it is the case that since the seventeenth century we have witnessed remarkable developments in human understanding, particularly with regard to nature's processes. Our technological abilities bring immeasurable human goods (advances in medicine) as well as potentially devastating costs (climate change or weapons of modern warfare). But despite all this 'progress', it is not clear that we are wiser or better people. For Plato, philosophy is not principally concerned with uncovering more and more facts about the world. As we have seen, it is really about discerning the nature of wisdom and the character of the good life. In these spheres, which are at once both philosophical and theological, we have far more to learn from the philosophers of antiquity than we might imagine. At the very least, the strangeness of the texts – and many are weird and difficult – should unsettle our modern imagination and help us to see things differently. So in order truly to read a text of ancient philosophy, one must allow the text to interrogate us, as readers, rather than understand ourselves simply as interrogators of the text.

The second challenge that confronts us in reading ancient philosophy concerns our tendency to impose priorities, questions, categories or meanings which are alien to the text. For example, it is very tempting when reading a dialogue by Plato to think that the dramatic details are mere decoration behind which lie arguments which might be expressed in bare propositional terms. As we have seen with the *Phaedrus*, the genre of the text and the setting of the dialogue are crucial aspects of Plato's argument that are integral to the way in which he conceives philosophy's task. The text needs to be read as drama, literature *and* philosophy; for Plato, these form an integrated whole which work to persuade us (rather than compel us) to assent to the argument and vision being proposed. When you are reading a dialogue by Plato, it may be revealing to find some friends with whom you can read the text so that, as when reading a play, each person can take a different part and the conversational character of the discourse can come to life.

Another example of the imposition of questions and priorities which, on careful inspection, are not wholly consistent with a text of ancient philosophy can be found in some readings of Aristotle's great work *Metaphysics*. This work was probably compiled by an editor in the first century AD, around four hundred years after its various chapters and books were written.

That same editor gave the title *'Metaphysics*' to this work. For Aristotle, these writings and lectures are concerned with what he called 'first philosophy'. This encompassed wisdom, theology (in the sense of the study of ultimate origins and purposes) and 'being' in its most general or abstract sense. Aristotle is not concerned with *particular* things – *this* table, *that* horse, *the* cosmos – but with being *in general*. In other words, this 'first philosophy' encompassed everything including *theos*, or 'God'. Book twelve of the *Metaphysics* is one of the most famous and studied texts in ancient philosophy. It is particularly important for theologians because it apparently offers a significant proof for the existence of God. Put very simply, Aristotle seems to argue that the universe exhibits motion (by which he means any kind of change) and this motion must have an ultimate source or cause which is itself beyond motion. Modern philosophy of religion places discussions of the proofs of God's existence at the very heart of its debates, so there is a temptation to assume that proving the existence of God is Aristotle's primary concern in this central book of his *Metaphysics*. Many modern commentaries and discussions of book 12 take this approach; they assume that proving God's existence by means of what is now labelled a 'cosmological argument' is Aristotle's principal concern. But is the text all about proving that God exists? Take a look at the opening lines: 'Our enquiry is concerned with substance; for it is the principles and causes of substances that we are investigating.' Aristotle goes on to discuss what he means by substance, and the different kinds of substance which he includes within his cosmology. Amongst these is what he calls 'non-sensible and eternal substance', which is God. But Aristotle's principal concern is not simply to set out a proof of God's existence in the formal logical sense. Rather, he is articulating a systematic cosmology which includes a particular view of an ultimate, eternal and unmoved origin. To read book 12 of the *Metaphysics* as if it were just a proof of God's existence would result in a failure to capture the full extent of Aristotle's purpose and argument.[4] So presented with texts of ancient philosophy, it is perhaps important to heed one straightforward recommendation which is nevertheless sometimes easier said than done: read the text, the whole text and, to begin with, nothing but the text!

Reading Philosophy in the Early Church

For the first Christian theologians, the question was not simply *how* to read philosophy, but *why* read philosophy? It was not self-evident that philosophy should be treated as trustworthy

[4] For a close and attentive reading of Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Λ, see Helen S. Lang, 'The Structure and Subject of *Metaphysics* Λ' in *Phronesis* 38(3), 1993, 257-280.

or valuable because philosophers were pagan thinkers. By contrast, Christians had received knowledge of a wholly different order in the form of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Writing at the end of the second century, the north African theologian Tertullian famously asked 'what indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?'[5] His question concerns the encounter between two very different traditions of enquiry and literature. 'Athens' refers to the philosophers of ancient Greece, chief amongst them Plato and his followers. These speculative thinkers analyse fundamental problems of existence and meaning through rhetorical argument. By contrast, 'Jerusalem' refers to the Hebraic tradition which we can most readily find in the Jewish law and the Hebrew Bible. This literature is not concerned with the carefully fashioned terminology of Greek rhetoric or logical analysis, but with meaning and truth as discerned in narrative, poetry and drama. In short, for the early Christian theologians the tradition of Jerusalem tells the story of a people, the Israelites, from whom was brought the Messiah, Jesus the Christ. His life, death and resurrection, told in the narratives and letters of the New Testament, is God's revelation which is now proclaimed through the liturgy of the Church under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Although he used the tools of Stoic philosophy in his treatises, the implication of Tertullian's rhetorical question is that the Church, being the recipient of the revelation of divine wisdom in the incarnate Word of God, should be wary of the wisdom of pagans represented by philosophy. Philosophers were regarded as the forerunners of heretics, not the forerunners of Christians.

At first glance this attitude is understandable. If one opens a book of the Old Testament, whether it be the saga of Genesis, the prophecy of Isaiah or the poetry of the Psalms, it will be very different to what usually passes for philosophy. Yet the historical record shows us that there never was a pure and pristine 'theology', Jewish or Christian, which did not in some way engage with other intellectual traditions, including the philosophical learning to be found in ancient Greece.[6] This is particularly evident in the writings of Greek-speaking Jews

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[5] Tertullian, trans. Peter Holmes, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* (On Prescription Against Heretics) in Alexander Roberts and James Donalsdon (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol.3 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), ch. 7, quotation appearing on p. 246.

[6] Acts 16.9 tells of Paul's calling in a dream to 'cross over' to the Greek province of Macedonia from the city of Troas in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). This 'crossing over' is taken as a metaphor for the journey of revealed faith into Europe and the encounter with Greek philosophical learning. See Pope Benedict XVI, 'Faith, Reason and the University – Memories and Reflections', a lecture delivered at the University of Regensburg, 12th September, 2006: 'The encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance. The vision of Saint Paul, who saw the roads to Asia barred and in a dream saw a Macedonian man plead with him: "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" (cf. Acts 16:6-10) - this vision can be interpreted as a "distillation" of the intrinsic necessity of a rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek inquiry.'

who obviously combine Athens and Jerusalem in their lives and work. The primary example is Philo, a first century Greek (or 'Hellenic') Jewish writer from Alexandria in Egypt. Philo merges the thought of Plato and the Stoic philosophers with Jewish narrative and scriptural exegesis. The theologians of the early Church, including Justin Martyr (c.100-c.165) and Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.215), and those writing later in antiquity such as the Cappadocian Fathers (fl. late 4th c.), Cyril of Alexandria (d.444) and Augustine of Hippo (354-430), were educated in the thought of the ancient Greeks and deployed their methods and terminology to make clear the meaning and implications of Christian *doctrina*, or teaching. The Church Fathers had two favourite images for the use of philosophy by Christian theology. The first concerns the story of Jesus changing water into wine at a wedding in Cana (John 2.1-11). Christian theology turns the water of pagan philosophy into the rich wine of divine truth. The second concerns the Israelites taking treasures from their Egyptian captors as they fled into the wilderness (Exodus 12.33-36). Like the Israelites who put the treasures of the Egyptians to a higher use in the service of the one God, so Christian theology can take the treasures of ancient philosophy and put this learning to a higher use in clarifying the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

So why did the theologians of the early Church perceive value in the philosophical teachings of pagans? We can highlight two reasons. First, ancient Greek philosophy as taught particularly by Plato and Aristotle and later, from around the 3rd century AD, by the tradition known as Neoplatonism, had discerned the fundamental importance of a transcendent 'One'. Other ancient schools, including the various paganisms of the Romans, saw the origins of the universe and the fate of human lives to lie in the fickle and capricious behaviour of a plurality of gods. Not only did Plato and Aristotle make the discipline of philosophy more formal and critical, they also discerned the importance of a single source of existence and, therefore, truth. For Plato, this lay in the Form of the Good which, we are told in his dialogue the *Republic*, lies beyond being. For Aristotle, the final end of all things and the source of motion in the universe lies in a divine first unmoved mover who is fully actual. Seeing a single source of being and truth presents a philosophical problem that is very prominent in ancient thought: what is the relationship between that *one* transcendent source, and the *many* changeable things we see in the universe? How can temporal plurality come from eternal unity? The question of the relationship between unity and plurality lies particularly at the heart of Platonic philosophy, yet its discernment of unity as the divine source of all things clearly resonates with the key insight of the Hebrew scriptures: there is only one God. The

monotheism of Judaism and Christianity is anticipated in the thought of the finest ancient philosophers.

A second reason why theologians of the ancient Church valued philosophical learning lies in their understanding of the relationship between faith and reason, and hence their view of theology's relationship to philosophy. We tend to think of theology as concerned with matters of faith and religious practice. It deals with God's revelation in Christ mediated through the Scriptures and expounded in Church teaching and Christian life. On the other hand, philosophy is concerned with reason and finds its source in critical human thought. However, for many of the Church's first theologians there was no fundamental discontinuity between the spheres of faith and reason. While God revealed himself most particularly in Christ, nevertheless we could also explore the things of God via philosophical reason as they are disclosed in creation. After all, the reason exhibited in philosophy was understood to participate in the *Logos* or 'reason' through which all things were made (John 1). That same *Logos*, or reason, was made known in the incarnation of the Son, the Word made flesh. So there is no discrete sphere of reason which belongs only to philosophy. Likewise, 'revelation' was not understood as a wholly separate stock of knowledge which suddenly arrives from nowhere in a way that is completely disconnected from the way that we think about reality philosophically. Revelation always has to have *something* to do with our reason, otherwise how could we recognise revelation and make sense of it?

While the early centuries of the Church are an attempt to come to terms with the meaning and implications of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in philosophical learning theologians found the tools and concepts which would allow them to make sense of the event of Christ. Therefore, Christian theology always involved a reading of philosophy alongside a reading of its authoritative scriptural texts. Theology and philosophy, and faith and reason, were always intertwined yet distinct. At the same time, philosophy was consummated in its service of the God-focussed reason of the Church. Philosophy was made *more* compelling and rational when it was put to theological ends. Hence we arrive at a broad consensus within both the ancient and medieval Church: philosophy acts as a handmaid to theology, not because of any deficiency or lack of clarity within God's revelation, but because of the sinful weakness of human minds.

It is for these reasons that the early Christians used a number of Greek philosophical texts for understanding the faith they had received from the apostles. For example, the categories used by the Cappadocian Fathers in articulating their Trinitarian doctrine of God were drawn from Greek philosophy. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), perhaps the greatest theologian of the West, was deeply influenced by his reading of the pagan Neoplatonist philosophers Plotinus (205-270) and Porphyry of Tyre (c.234–c.305) as well as the Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero (106BC-43BC) and his dialogue *Hortensius*. While he was competent in reading Greek, Augustine more frequently read texts which had been translated into Latin. The works of Plotinus and Porphyry were available in Latin translation by Marius Victorinus (fl. 4th century). Some of Plato's works were available to Augustine in Greek, but only a portion of the *Timaeus* had been translated into Latin and Augustine shows little sign of having studied Plato's works. Nevertheless, the deep influence of Plato's philosophy, and that of the Neoplatonists whose thought became dominant in antiquity, can be found throughout his writings. The reading of philosophy in this period was therefore not a straightforward affair, being a combination of engagement with translated texts and an oral tradition of teaching and learning. However, reading philosophy was clearly part-and-parcel of being a Christian theologian and teacher.

Reading Philosophy the Medieval Way

Around the sixth century, as the world of antiquity faded into the period we label the Middle Ages, the reading of philosophy by Christian theologians, particularly those in the Latin speaking West, at first became less and less significant. Crises in Christian belief surrounding the doctrine of God and the nature of Christ had been negotiated. The Councils of the Church had established a settled Christian teaching, making fulsome use of the philosophical texts and traditions at their disposal. Although a Christianised Neoplatonism remained prevalent, particularly in the Greek-speaking East under the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius (late 5th-6th century) and Maximus the Confessor (c.580-662), the texts of Plato fell into obscurity and the works of Aristotle were largely unknown except for Latin translations of, and commentaries on, two works: the *Categories* and *On Interpretation*. It was not until the twelfth century that Greek philosophy was read in earnest once again by Christian thinkers of the West. The scholars of the Islamic world had received and translated Aristotle's works from Greek into Arabic. They also wrote commentaries on these works, enabling Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, to be taught effectively to students. Michael

the Scot (1175-c.1232), an influential philosopher and mathematician, had acquired a knowledge of Arabic and was able to translate Aristotle's works from Arabic into Latin. These works were re-introduced into the Latin West throughout the thirteenth century, spawning a range of commentaries by Christian thinkers. The most influential exponent of Aristotle's ideas was Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274), the Italian Dominican Friar who spent significant portions of his life teaching at the new University of Paris. He was introduced to Aristotle by his teacher and confrere, the German theologian Albert the Great (c.1193-1280). Aquinas simply refers to Aristotle as 'the Philosopher' and makes extensive use of Aristotle's works in composing his most influential treatises, notably the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (summary of theology against unbelievers) and the voluminous introduction to theology for beginners, the *Summa Theologiae* (summary of theology).

Although Aquinas is sometimes described as an Aristotelian, he is not an uncritical reader of Aristotle's works. Aquinas was educated within the context of an alternative and more prevalent philosophical school, Neoplatonism, and wrote commentaries on a number of texts in that tradition. He is therefore chiefly known as a synthesizer of the broadly Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical systems, all in the service of expounding the Church's *sacra doctrina*, or 'holy teaching'.

How does Aquinas read Aristotle, and what can we learn from this reading? We should remember that for a large part of his career Aquinas was not reading Aristotle directly; he was reading a translation of a translation of Aristotle. Reading texts in translation, let alone a translation of a translation, always presents a challenge in preserving the authenticity and integrity of philosophical works. Nevertheless, Aquinas engages in a very detailed reading and interpretation of a number of Aristotle's texts. We witness his reading at first hand in the twelve commentaries he wrote an Aristotelian works, some of them brief but many very detailed and extensive. Aquinas shows that Aristotle's works are well ordered, yet they require critical interpretation. By 'critical', one does not simply mean that Aquinas sought to disagree with, or criticise, Aristotle. Rather, a critical approach is a discerning and interpretative approach to the text: what is crucial and what is less significant? How does one line of enquiry lead to and illuminate the next? How do the various categories and concepts illuminate one another? Can we discern a coherent and singular philosophical vision? What is the philosopher's purpose as revealed in the text?

Aquinas wrote commentaries on Aristotle principally as lectures for his students. Printed books were still centuries away, so this was the most effective way of conveying a body of knowledge to a wider audience. Aquinas's students would 'read' Aristotle by listening to their master expound the key works and very often they would commit lengthy passages of Aristotle to memory. This reveals a very important characteristic of the reading of philosophy in both the Middle Ages and antiquity: one reads *as part of a tradition* of reading and interpretation. This means that one had to be taught *how* to read. It was not simply a matter of hearing Aristotle read aloud, nor even of 'reading the text for oneself' if one was lucky enough to have access to the manuscript. Quite the contrary: reading was a public rather than a private matter which was undertaken in conversation with one's teacher, fellow students and a whole tradition of interpretation which could be accessed through readers and commentators of previous generations. Neither was reading philosophy a matter of being given a stock of facts or concepts which one then deployed at will. A student had to be taken by the hand and lead *through* a text, rather in the way that a tour guide might show a visitor around a city. The guide or teacher points to the text's significant 'landmarks', relating those concepts and ideas to each other and to the history of the text's interpretation. It is almost as if one had to 'enter' the text in order to inhabit its viewpoints and witness its trajectory. In a way, when we read novels today we adopt this style of reading; we step into the imaginary world portrayed by the author through the characters and the setting of the narrative. The best novels draw us in, almost turning the reader into one of the novel's characters. For Aquinas, to read Aristotle was a little like reading literature. He leads his students – including us – *into* the text to inhabit the Aristotelian vision, to try to see the world as Aristotle sees it and to walk around within that world.

This reminds me of some advice I received from one of my first teachers of philosophy and theology, himself a lifelong reader of Thomas Aquinas. He told his students not to 'try to get Plato or Aristotle into our heads' because our small minds would not cope. Rather, we should 'try to get inside the heads of Plato and Aristotle'. How? By *entering* their texts as readers in order to try to see the world differently with the eyes of Plato or Aristotle.

The way that Aquinas uses Aristotle in his own writings is also very revealing. In a number of works, Aquinas arranges his material more-or-less according to the format of a seminar in the University of Paris. A general theme would be identified, for example, the eternity of God. Questions would be posed relating to that theme, for example, does being eternal belong to

God alone? To begin with, Aquinas weighs up one side of the argument, for example that eternity does not belong to God alone. He offers a number of points in favour of this view. Then he offers an alternative view and provides a 'response' to the question. He often utilises a number of sources and authorities in articulating a response, including Aristotle 'the Philosopher'. After the response, he replies one-by-one to the initial points made when the question was first posed. Throughout his writing, Aquinas places great weight on Aristotle's philosophy and makes very careful use of his concepts and teachings. However, Aristotle is just one of a number of sources at his disposal including, for example, the Church Fathers, Pseudo-Dionysius and occasionally (although sometimes in order to oppose them) the Islamic philosophers and readers of Aristotle, the Persian Avicenna (980-1037) and the Spanish scholar Averroes (1126-1198). Of course, the supreme and focal authority for Aquinas is always Scripture. What is crucial, however, is that these various texts are read alongside each other, with Scripture as the governing heart of the discussion. Aquinas places them into conversation. As a Master of Theology he initiates his students *into* this conversation through a reading of authoritative theological and philosophical texts. It was as if 'reading philosophy' had its own broader intellectual ritual or liturgy. Importantly, it was also conversational in character, just like philosophy in ancient Greece. The conversation did not simply take place within Aquinas's classroom; reading philosophy was also part of a conversation with a tradition of voices stretching back centuries. When we read philosophy publically, together, in conversation, rather than privately in our heads in a library, we are recovering something of the practice of reading philosophy in antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Nevertheless, to be called 'a philosopher' in the high Middle Ages was not a compliment. Philosophers were pagan thinkers, even though '*the* Philosopher', Aristotle, had, according to Aquinas, achieved great things. The ultimate purpose of reading philosophy was not to become a philosopher and then stop. Rather, philosophy was read in order to acquire an ancient wisdom which could provide Christian theology with a handmaid for the clarification of sacred teaching. The crucial point is that philosophy was deployed in order to *think with* the Christian tradition of reason as it is revealed in Christ who is the incarnation of 'divine reason'. It was not the job of philosophy to scrutinise religious teachings or doctrine from a supposed neutral standpoint, but to clarify those teachings. When a conflict arose between a teaching of Aristotelian philosophy and the deliverances of revealed Christian truth, it was clear that the latter was to interpret and place the former, not vice versa. Perhaps the clearest example of a conflict of this kind concerned Aristotle's teaching on creation. According to

Aristotle, the universe is of endless time; it has always existed, although its motion finds its fundamental cause in the 'first unmoved mover' who is beyond change. This was at odds with the teaching of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic theological traditions that God created 'out of nothing' or *ex nihilo*. This idea was contrary to Greek philosophy which claimed that 'from nothing, nothing comes'. For Aquinas, Aristotle's position was quite defensible. However, the Church's teaching was to be preferred because it was based on the witness of Scripture, the teaching of the tradition, and wider doctrinal concerns regarding the nature of God's grace and freedom. Still, Aristotle's thought could be used, even if negatively, to outline more precisely the distinctive meaning and implications of doctrines such as creation *ex nihilo*. To reiterate, philosophy was not principally used polemically to scrutinise the deliverances of faith and neither was it deployed to provide faith with rational foundations. Philosophy was to think 'in parallel' with faith, as Aquinas puts it in one of his early treatises. In the process, it is philosophy which is re-orientated and consummated according to a theological horizon.[7]

Reading Philosophy the Modern Way

The fortunes of Aristotle's philosophy took a significant turn for the worst in the generation immediately after Aquinas. In 1277, Just two years after Aquinas's death, the Bishop of Paris condemned a raft of Aristotelian teachings as contrary to the Christian faith. Yet the utility, power and comprehensive rigour of Aristotle's philosophy meant that his works recovered their influence and came to dominate the schools and universities of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Plato's texts were also introduced to a much wider readership through translations into Latin by the Italian humanist Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499). To learn about nature, politics, ethics and metaphysics, one read (and probably wrote a commentary on) Aristotle. Meanwhile, Plato's *Timaeus* was to have a significant impact on the character of early modern science because of his use of mathematics to understand nature, while his *Republic* influenced political theory. Philosophy was read for reasons which were not immediately connected to the priorities of the Church and the needs of theology.

[7] See Simon Oliver, 'The Parallel Journey of Faith and Reason: another look via Aquinas's *De Veritate*' in Simon Oliver, Karen Kilby and Tom O'Loughlin (eds), *Faithful Reading: New Essays in Theology in honour of Fergus Kerr* (London: Continuum, 2012), 113-130.

The proliferation of Aristotelian learning was no doubt encouraged by the invention of the printing press in the late fifteenth century. At the same time, one cannot underestimate the effect of printed books on the practice of reading, including the reading of philosophy. While printing enhanced the transmission of learning to a previously unimaginable extent, it also made possible the *private* ownership of texts. At the same time, this allowed the private reading of texts. Thus far, we have seen the way in which reading philosophy was a public, communal and conversational practice undertaken in the context of a much wider tradition of interpretation and communal learning. Following the advent of private collections of printed books, a reader could sit alone with a text, scrutinising the text and coming to her own interpretative conclusions. It seemed that no training or initiation in *how* to read the text was required. The text was not encountered and received collectively, but privately by individuals. The reading of philosophy had become a very 'interior' or private exercise.

How is this more individualistic approach to reading philosophy reflected in modern philosophy's texts? René Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*, published in Latin in 1641, is often regarded as a paradigmatic text of modern philosophy. The subtitle is revealing: 'in which the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are demonstrated.' This philosophy might be read not in order to understand better the Christian theological tradition and the revealed things of faith, but so as to provide a rational foundation for religious belief. The very fact that religious belief was deemed in need of a rational foundation from an autonomous philosophy already implied that religious belief was in itself a-rational or, worse still, irrational.

Descartes describes retreating alone to a room in order to question his every belief and search for an absolutely indubitable foundation for human knowledge. Eventually, that foundation is provided by his conviction that 'I am, I exist'. This was later expressed in his famous *cogito ergo sum*: I think, therefore I am. There was one thing Descartes could not doubt simply because he was doubting: his own existence. If there is doubt, something is doing the doubting, this 'I' which is, according to Descartes, a *res cogitans*, a 'thinking thing'. This is the foundation of his epistemology, or theory of knowledge. It also provides the basis for his proof that God exists.

When I first read Descartes's text as a student, it struck me as very strange and artificial, almost 'experimental'; philosophy seemed to be disconnected from the communal and

complex way people actually think and live. Descartes is fully aware that he is undertaking a specific and technical exercise of doubt; he commends it to his readers as something which might be undertaken at some time in their lives. However, the sense of the individual philosopher thinking in complete isolation stands in striking contrast to the picture we receive from ancient philosophy of the philosopher as part of a conversational school of thought. It seems that in modernity philosophy is not so much a way of life as a technical exercise in individual thinking. It suggests an image akin to Rodin's sculpture 'The Thinker' with which we began this chapter.

The eventual demise of the Aristotelian world-view in the seventeenth century, often associated with Descartes's writings, is also regarded as the beginning of that characteristic period in our intellectual and cultural history which we label 'modernity'. As well as developments in natural philosophy that heralded a radical break from that proposed in Aristotle's *Physics*, new priorities emerged for philosophy, particularly in relation to theology. The reading of philosophy was now undertaken not in order to 'think with' theology and provide a handmaid for the exposition of sacred teaching. Instead, philosophy had turned to face and scrutinise theology. It was to provide either a rational foundation for religious belief, as in Descartes, or critically to examine religious claims according to the standards of an independent reason, as in figures such as David Hume (1711-1776) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Hume famously critiqued miracles in his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) and the design argument for God's existence in his posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779). Kant's *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason* (1793), one of the most influential texts in philosophy of religion, is an attempt to reduce religion to its most basic rational foundations.

In modernity, philosophy came to be associated less and less with communal practices of reading and conversational thinking. Neither was it associated with schools and traditions of thought; this is part of modernity's suspicion of tradition as a source of intellectual authority. One way of describing this shift in philosophical priorities suggests that certain strands of philosophy became increasingly abstracted from traditions and histories of thought, and evermore focussed on the establishment of a single category of ahistorical reason which is accessible to all.[8] Philosophy was apparently seeking to establish its own rational foundations

[8] Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 3rd ed., 2007); Alasdair McIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1996).

devoid of any reference to theology or transcendence. It is during this period that philosophy comes not only to stare into the face of theology to lend to its rationalist credentials or pronounce the life of faith to be lacking reason. It also comes to stare into a mirror. One of philosophy's concerns is itself: given the increasingly separate natural sciences, the new social and human sciences, and a theological discourse which seemed to be concerned with an evermore autonomous stock of knowledge called 'revelation' which lies beyond reason, philosophy was left once again with two pressing questions: what is philosophy, and how is it undertaken?

In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, two very different answers to those questions emerged. One answer regarded philosophy as a set of canonical questions or issues that are to be pursued by making language as simple and transparent as possible. At its most straightforward and basic, the language to be deployed was that of symbolic logic, although so-called 'ordinary language philosophy' emerged in the later twentieth century to revive the use of everyday language in philosophical enquiry. This approach to philosophy was not concerned with history or tradition, but with a set of increasingly abstract and often narrow metaphysical problems requiring logical resolution. This school, which is nevertheless notoriously difficult to define with any precision, continues to dominate philosophy in the Anglophone world and has become known as 'analytic philosophy'. It is associated particularly with figures such as Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), Gottlob Frege (1848-1925) and G.E. Moore (1873-1958).

A range of alternative answers to the question of the nature of philosophy emerged from the tradition of European philosophy which came after Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). It is associated with figures such as Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), his nemesis G.F. Hegel (1770-1831), the German poet and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), the phenomenological school of philosophy founded by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and influenced by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), so-called post-structuralist philosophers such as Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), and those focussed on hermeneutics (the science of interpretation) such as Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002). Originally, the term 'continental philosophy' simply defined everything which was not regarded as analytic philosophy. In the broadest terms, 'continental philosophy' is concerned with the history and cultural context of philosophy and human enquiry. It avoids any simple empirical approach to philosophical enquiry and scrutinises the way in which we experience and interpret reality, regarding this

not as a fixed and stable given, but as malleable and context-driven. Unlike analytic philosophy, continental philosophy tends to be much more sceptical concerning the power of modern science adequately to grasp the full reality of the world. On some accounts, a distinction can be drawn between analytic and continental philosophy with reference to the concept of 'reason'. Analytic philosophy has been seen as committed to a view of reason which is often associated with the Enlightenment: reason is ahistorical, objective and accessible to all. By contrast, continental philosophy has apparently regarded reason as contextual and driven by traditions and practices of thought. It does not provide an independent ground by which to judge other discourses in purely dispassionate fashion.

Much that passes for 'philosophy of religion' in Religion departments in the UK and America belongs more to the analytic school of philosophy; it structures its discourse around abstract metaphysical problems (proofs of God's existence, the evidential force of religious experience, the problem of evil) rather than figures and traditions of thought in their context. However, an increasing number of philosophers regard the distinction between continental and analytic philosophy to be unhelpful and increasingly meaningless. Nevertheless, both approaches have something to teach us about 'reading philosophy'. The analytic approach is often commended for its clarity and succinctness of expression. Meanwhile, the continental tradition pays more attention to the historical circumstances in which philosophy and theology are undertaken. Perhaps most importantly, it sometimes adopts a method which has been labelled 'genealogy' and is particularly associated with Nietzsche and the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984). Put simply, this approach claims that, like people and their families, concepts such as 'God', 'society' or 'being' *have histories* or 'genealogies'. In other words, concepts do not have a uniform meaning throughout our intellectual tradition. They arise in different contexts and take on subtly different meanings. Those changing contexts and meanings can be traced 'genealogically'. For theologians, this is crucial because the concepts we employ – God, evil, revelation, creation, love, reason – are used in very different ways throughout the tradition. To read and write theology responsibly, we have to be acutely aware of the ever-changing meanings and contexts of the concepts we use.

So when reading philosophy (particularly modern and late modern philosophy) it may help to be aware that philosophers will have a range of views concerning the nature, scope and aims of philosophy. It is therefore particularly important to keep some key questions to the fore when reading such philosophy: why was this text written? In what context was it written, and

for whom? What does it assume about the nature and task of philosophy? Is there an implicit theological perspective underlying the text?

Reading Philosophy Today

In the nineteenth century, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche announced the death of God. In the early twentieth century, a philosophical school named 'Logical Positivism' announced the end of theology and metaphysics because their subject matters – God, for example – were not empirically verifiable and were therefore meaningless. Despite these attempts by modern philosophy to inoculate itself against theology, even the most cursory glance at the practice of philosophy in recent decades reveals that the disciplines of theology and philosophy continue to be ineluctably intertwined.[9] Reading philosophy is an undertaking proper to any theologian, for in philosophical enquiry we find the 'stretching' of the human soul towards ultimate questions of transcendence which belong also within the ambit of theology. In this chapter, we have seen *how* the practice of reading philosophy has changed as the discipline of philosophy has developed. We have referred to some very different understandings of *what* constitutes philosophy. We have also examined *why* theologians have read philosophy. Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from the reading of philosophy as it was undertaken by the earliest Christian theologians is that philosophy is a way of life focussed on conversation. Here, the reading of philosophy blends with theology because, as humans engage together in a philosophical conversation concerning truth, meaning and purpose, the claim emerges from Christian theology that God has entered that conversation decisively and corporeally in the incarnation of the *Logos*. At the point of God's address in Christ, philosophy finds itself addressed. God speaks *into* human philosophy and history. In order to read that conversation rightly, we might ask a properly Platonic and Aristotelian question: what kind of habits and forms of life are required for theologians who seek to become good and able readers of philosophy in all its complex historical guises? Certainly patience to enter into the text, to inhabit the world of the philosopher who authored the text through attentiveness to context and history. Certainly humility to allow the text to speak for itself and scrutinize the reader. Also, love. Ancient philosophy spoke fulsomely of *eros*; it is a virtue one associates rather less readily with modern philosophy. The 'lover of

[9] To take just one small example, we might note the intense interest in St. Paul amongst contemporary continental philosophers. See John D. Caputo and Linda Martin Alcoff (eds.), *St. Paul among the Philosophers* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009).

wisdom' was Socrates's defining characteristic. Such love began not with the proud parading of a stock of knowledge or the clever techniques associated with the Sophists, but with what became known as a 'learned ignorance'. As a philosopher, Socrates was first aware that, while others thought they were knowledgeable but in fact were not, he was aware of his own ignorance and was driven by that lack and the associated desire for understanding. Yet Socrates also understood that he was not an active enquirer beginning from scratch within a passive universe; he had been the subject of an address. Through the visible reality we inhabit, he had been spoken to by beauty, truth and goodness.[10] The good reader of philosophy knows her own lack of knowledge, receives an address, and enters an ancient and complex philosophical conversation which eventually has to deal with the outlandish theological claim that God himself has addressed creation in his own incarnate *Logos*.

[10] See Plato's dialogue *Apology* in which Socrates discovers that he is the wisest person because he is aware of his own ignorance. See also Simon Oliver, 'Wisdom and Belief in Theology and Philosophy' in Michael McGhee and John Cornwell (eds.), *Philosophers and God: at the frontiers of faith and reason* (London: Continuum, 2009), 231-246.